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The Catwalk of Whitewater Canyon

Gila National Forest



Above photo by Andrew Gulliford.
Front cover photo by Mark Erickson.

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Forest
Service

Southwestern
Region

Whitewater Canyon and the Catwalk



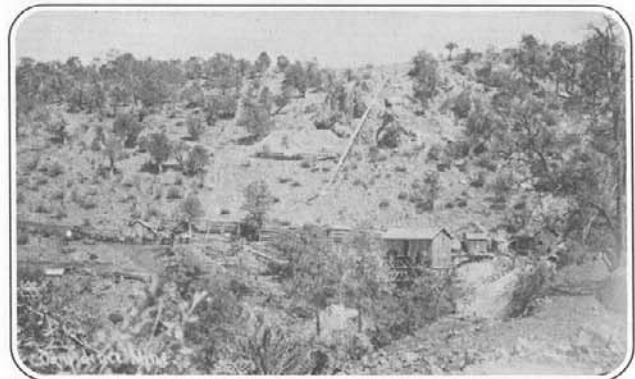
There is little to remind the modern visitor to the Gila National Forest that a century or so ago life here was full of danger and uncertainty. Struggles raged between the resident Apaches and the newcomers—prospectors, miners, settlers, soldiers, and overland travelers. Miners, who discovered bonanzas in gold and silver in the Mogollons, never strayed far from their weapons.

With the death of such chiefs as Victorio and Geronimo, outlaws appeared in the rich mining towns that dotted the high mountains near the big gold strikes. Nature, too, at times proved unfriendly, claiming the lives of many men who ignored the dangers of winter in the high country.

Whitewater Canyon, site of the popular Catwalk and the Catwalk National Recreation Trail, was a central point in the mining saga. The town of Graham, also called Whitewater, grew up around a mill built by John T. Graham in 1893. The town lived less than 10 years. All that remains to mark the spot are several huge wooden beams and part of the mill walls clinging to the west side of the canyon near the entrance to the Catwalk. The mines above the canyon were worked from their discovery in 1889 until 1942.

This part of New Mexico territory grew slowly until the middle of the 1800's when military forts were established to protect the folks streaming through this area on their way to the California gold rush from possible Indian

attacks. The forts brought many more outsiders into the area. Gold and silver were discovered here by James C. Cooney, a soldier stationed at Fort Bayard.



Confidence Mine

Cooney found gold and silver deposits while on a scouting mission but could do nothing to develop his discoveries until he was discharged from the service in 1875. He then organized a party to prospect the district. Among them was John Lambert who found rich gold and silver ore just above Whitewater Canyon.

The mines developed from the Lambert findings include the Confidence, Bluebird, Blackbird, and Redbird which fed the mill at Graham. Some of these mines were dug to a depth of 1,000 feet. A few of the old workings are still being mined today. The market price of the precious metals determines the economic feasibility of mining and ore production.

Cooney worked his claims from 1876 until April 30, 1880 when he was killed by Apaches. Cooney's brother and friends carved his tomb out of a huge boulder in the canyon where he was killed. The tomb was sealed with ore from the mines he discovered. His tomb can still be seen on Mineral Creek, north of Whitewater Canyon.

Whitewater Canyon presented special mining and milling problems to the Helen Mining Co., first developer of thirteen claims about 4 miles upstream from the site of Graham and the mill. The mill, powered mainly by electricity, could not be built closer to the mines because of the rough and narrow canyon. While the stream frequently dried up at the millsite, it ran almost continuously on the high mountains where the mines were located.

Water needed by the town (population about 200) and an electric generator was provided by construction of a 4-inch pipeline reaching about 3 miles up the canyon. The



Whitewater Canyon and the Catwalk

pipeline was built in 1893 along with the mill. The line followed the west side of the canyon and was packed in sawdust and encased in wood to protect it from freezing. In 1897, a larger amount of water was needed to run a big new generator. An 18-inch pipeline was built parallel to the smaller line and directly over the stream. The present day Catwalk follows the route of the 4-inch line.

Construction of the water lines was an engineering feat that probably would not be attempted today. Brace holes were drilled into the solid rock walls—sometimes 20 feet above the canyon floor—to hold timbers and iron bars that supported the small water line along its meandering course. Some of the original 18-inch pipes support one side of the present Catwalk. Old records show that the large iron water line was in constant need of maintenance. Workmen who had to walk the line to repair damage dubbed it the "Catwalk."

The pipe used in the line was delivered to the site by wagons drawn by teams of up to 40 horses. Similar trains hauled in heavy generators that powered the mill. Smaller teams pulled ore down the mountain to an ore chute on the ridge just above the mill. In 1912, construction of an aerial tram was considered to cart ore from the mines to the mill, but apparently it was never started.

Despite the large investment of time and money, the Graham Mill was never highly successful. Periodic episodes of flooding and, allegedly, mismanagement kept the



Eighteen inch water pipeline.



The original catwalk.

WNNMU Museum Photo

mill from flourishing. It was finally closed in 1913. Most of the construction material, including the pipelines, was salvaged and sold.

After 1913, the massive rock walls of Whitewater Canyon saw few visitors until the 1930's when the Civilian Conservation Corps was assigned the task of rebuilding the Catwalk as a recreation attraction for the Gila National Forest. The men of the CCC, whose camp was located at the site of the present Glenwood Community Park along Whitewater Canyon, worked on the project during 1935 and 1936. The CCC-built Catwalk served until 1961 when the present metal Catwalk was constructed by the Forest Service. On December 18, 1978, the Catwalk plus the next 1.15 miles of trail to the junction of Whitewater Creek and South Fork were designated a National Recreation Trail.

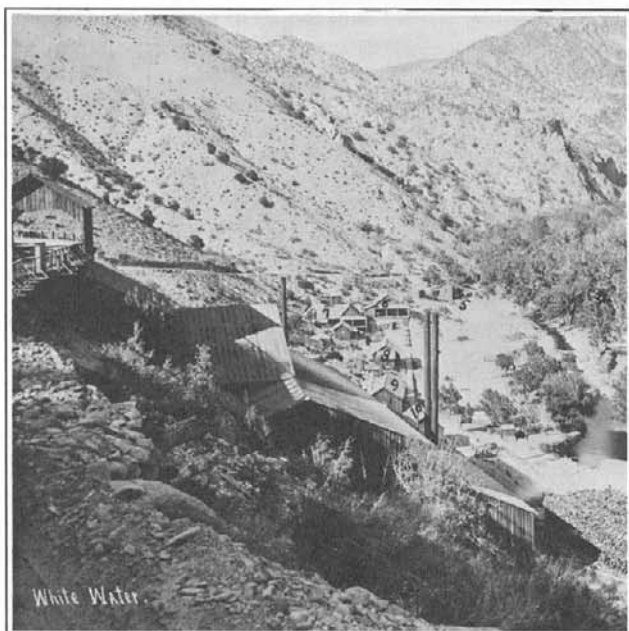
Since the time the Forest Service originally constructed the trail, the canyon has experienced numerous major storms which have taken their toll on the improvements. These devastating floods caused perpetual reconstruction and maintenance needs. The developed portion of the trail past the long steel "catwalk" span was relocated out of the creek's active floodpath in 1986.

Each year the Catwalk becomes more popular with visitors to the Gila. Thousands take the thrilling walk along the cool and colorful Whitewater Canyon and many use the pleasant picnicking facilities at the Whitewater Picnic Grounds.



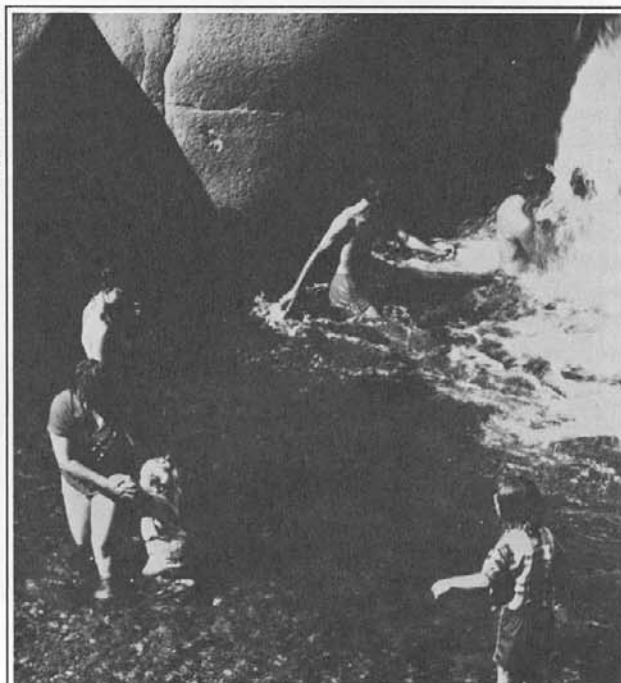
Supplies arrived by wagons often drawn by teams of up to 40 horses

The town of Graham, also called Whitewater, grew up around a mill built by John T. Graham in 1893.



Present day visitors enjoy the cool waters of Whitewater Creek above Whitewater Picnic Area.

Andrew Gulliford



Looking Back . . .

It is not known when the Apache came into this area, but it was probably at least by the early 1500's. They were nomadic hunters and gatherers who came from the north. The Apaches who lived in this area are referred to as the Chiricahua (Cheer-a-ka-wa), or locally as Mimbrenos, Mogollones or Gila Apaches. Due to the nature of the land and resources, the Chiricahua were a thinly dispersed tribe.

The ruggedness of the land probably contributed to their cultural stability, at least for awhile during the early years of contact with newcomers to this area. The numerous military forays and missionizing attempts into Apache territory by the Spanish had little impact. The Mexicans, after declaring their independence from Spain in 1821, were too occupied with their own internal problems and with American expansion to pursue any efforts to establish control over this area. The Apache, however, weren't so fortunate with the US, who after the War with Mexico in 1848 and the resulting Gadsen Purchase in 1853 which brought the Apache territory under their dominance, became very interested in the land the Chiricahua occupied.

The American interests were primarily focused on protecting the overland trails and transport roads; encouraging farming/ranching and mining; and providing land grants to the veterans of the Mexican War. The United States built military forts in the area and brought in military personnel. As mentioned earlier, the major discovery of gold and silver in this area was made in 1870 by Sgt. James C. Cooney, stationed at Fort Bayard, while he was on a scouting mission.

The Apache had been living in this area for at least 300 years—more than 10 generations—by the time of the Gadsen Purchase. They did what they could to protect their land, homes and resources from this major influx of Americans passing through on their way to find gold, and from the ranchers, military personnel, prospectors and miners who followed. The next 30-35 years brought about continuous discord between the Apache and the military, and other individuals and groups. Some of the prominent names in Apache history who were caught up in the struggle to protect their own way of life during this time were: Cochise, Victorio, Geronimo, Mangus Coloradas, Naiche, Nana and woman warrior Lozen.

By the late 1880's, the military had eliminated the threat the Chiricahua held for new people coming into this land by removing them to Florida, Alabama and then Oklahoma. Mining and ranching activities increased. More and more people came into this area. The prospectors had been successful in finding silver and gold in the Mogollon

mountains and mining towns and mill sites began to dot the area. The area was heady with the activities of bustling new frontier towns, with prospectors striking it rich, hard working miners, ranchers, and, of course, outlaws.

The Whitewater Canyon served as a hideout place for Butch Cassidy and the Wild Bunch, or the Hole in the Wall Gang. Butch Cassidy and his cohorts were known locally only as hard working ranch hands at the nearby WS Ranch, heading out of this area for their "outlawing" activities. Although Billy the Kid didn't seem to spend any of his short life in the Whitewater Canyon area, his stepfather, William Antrim, worked as a blacksmith in the town of Graham.



Geronimo . . . Apache warrior, leader and medicine man.

WNMU Museum photo

The Gila National Forest

During the mining era, the early Forest Service played a significant role in the development of southwestern New Mexico. Beginning in 1899, the Gila Forest Reserve (forerunner of the Gila National Forest) was created. The Forest Service administered the land on which gold was mined. Much of the privately owned acreage in the Mogollons today was originally claimed through mining patents. The Forest supplied lumber and firewood used in the mills and mines while wildlife was a major food source for the pioneers.

Within the administrative boundary of the Gila National Forest are 3.3 million acres of some of the most scenic mountain lands in the Southwest. Many peaks within the forest exceed 10,000 feet elevation. These snow-catching mountains form the watershed for the Gila, Mimbres, and San Francisco Rivers which make irrigation farming possible in nearby areas of New Mexico and Arizona.

Game animals and fish abound on the Gila and can be taken within the seasons set by the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. The Gila Wilderness alone boasts 186 miles of trout streams.

Camping, picnicking and hiking/backpacking are some of the most popular activities on the Gila. Please contact any of the Gila National Forest offices for further information on these opportunities. For those hiking and sightseeing enthusiasts, the Catwalk trail unfortunately is not accessible for the handicapped since a good portion of the trail is constructed of metal grillwork.

Information on the forest's recreation opportunities as well as maps are available from the Gila National Forest Supervisor's Office in Silver City, NM and from local district offices. Maps include a recreation map of the entire forest, and a set of topographic trail maps of the Gila Wilderness and the adjacent Aldo Leopold Wilderness.

The employees of the Gila hope you find many opportunities to visit this beautiful national forest.

*Remember, the Gila and all
national forests are yours to
enjoy, protect, and keep clean.*

RESPECT IT!

The Glenwood District of the Gila National Forest



Whitewater Canyon and the Catwalk lie within the 529,860-acre Glenwood Ranger District on the western edge of the Gila National Forest. Elevations within this sparsely populated district range from 3,965 feet at the San Francisco River to 10,895 feet at Whitewater Baldy Mountain. Whitewater Canyon, site of the Catwalk, and the San Francisco Gorges, northeast and southwest of Glenwood are considered the major scenic attractions within the district.

Average annual precipitation varies from 13 inches in the low country to more than 30 inches high in the Mogollons where winter snows are heavy. Summer rains usually occur in July and August when daily showers are frequently accompanied by lightning storms.

Mixed conifer, pine, grassland, and pinyon-juniper are the four vegetative types found within the district. The mixed conifer, found at the highest elevation, includes Engelmann and blue spruce, white and corkbark fir, Douglas-fir, aspen, ponderosa pine and limber pine. Under the trees grow such plants as junegrass, ferns, brome, cinquefoil, bluegrass and aspen which feed many species of wildlife. Ponderosa pine grow above 6,500 feet. Oak, mixed conifer, and pinyon-juniper are intermixed in this region. Further down the slopes the grasslands take over with such species as sideoats grama, black grama, hairy grama, and blue grama. The grassy area also is the domain of the pinyon-juniper.

Vegetation found in the canyon consists of Arizona sycamore, Arizona walnut, Fremont cottonwood, netleaf hackberry, Emory oak, numerous flowering plants, shrubs and streamside vegetation characteristic of lower elevation riparian areas in the Gila. Whitewater Creek, a small tributary of the San Francisco River, breaks through the mountains forming the spectacular Whitewater Canyon. The walls of the canyon created by long ago volcanos are a wonderful color, changing as sunlight plays across the surfaces.

Geology

The main mass of the Mogollon range consists of successive sheets of volcanic rock. On the western side, the sheets dip slightly to the southwest and vary greatly in composition, texture and color. The west side of the Mogollon range is extensively faulted due to heavy volcanic action which was accompanied by flows of lava.